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ABSTRACT

The Tribal American Consulting Corporation designed a preschool program for American Indians in Los Angeles, California, which had two major goals: (1) to develop competence and attendant self esteem in both children and parents: and (2) to enable children to succeed in public school. Three curriculum models were used, based upon Indian culture, Montessori, and traditional/Piagetian philosophies. Programs involved preschool, kindergarten, and infant/toddler age groups. Standardized tests were administered by an external evaluator to gather longitudinal data, and to identify strengths and weaknesses. Although the tests were able to identify general language problems, a number of problems were evident from using these tests. Additional data were collected from observations of the students, particularly in their home interactions with parents. As a result of this evaluation, specific roles and responsibilities emerged for the personnel involved: evaluator, supervisor, teachers, and administrator. Specific guidelines for the selection, administration, and use of preschool tests were also developed. (Author/GDC)

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EVALUATION OF A COMPREHENSIVE EARLY EDUCATION PROGRAM FOR URBAN AMERICAN INDIAN CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

In 1972, Tribal American Consulting Corporation (TACC) began the work of developing a program to meet the needs of American Indian preschool children living in Los Angeles. The early education program had two important goals: (1) to develop competencies and attendant self-esteem within both children and parents; and (2) to enable children to succeed in public school.

In developing an evaluation design, an external evaluation firm, Orcutt and Associates, utilized standardized tests to gain longitudinal data and to identify areas of strengths and weaknesses in individuals and in groups of children. Data reported is for TACC's preschool, kindergarten, and infant/toddler programs for the years 1976-1979. Problems in utilizing standardized tests with preschool children are enumerated. Roles of the evaluator and of program staff are discussed.

While the tests did provide some useful information, identifying, for example, a range of language difficulties across the preschool/primary years, they did not provide an adequate evaluation of the preschool program or its effect on children. More specific information on child performance on a broader range of functioning--motivation/independence, cognitive (problem solving, concept learning), language, social/emotional, and physical--was gained through observations of child behavior.

The paper concludes by stating that evaluation needs to attend to the use of results--to support the teacher directly by improving the teacher's knowledge of students and what to do for them. Outcome needs to include design of individual learning materials/activities, design of small and large group activities, improvement in the learning environment, identification of gaps in materials, identification of staff training needs, and design of parent support activities.

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Introduction

Many educators have argued convincingly that the preschool years are the most strategic for improving American Indian education. This assumption stems from the importance of early education for all children--in developing basic competencies and in learning by processing symbols (using language). In 1972, Tribal American Consulting Corporation (TACC) began the work of developing a program to meet the needs of Indian preschool children living in greater Los Angeles. A majority of the American Indian families were second generation urban dwellers; others moved back and forth between tribal lands and the city's concrete. Reality dictated that the children would continue in urban public schools; they, too, would probably seek a livlihood in a city's diverse employment arena. The early education program, then, had two important goals: (1) to develop competencies and attendant self-esteem within both children and parents; and (2) to enable Indian children to succeed in public school. TACC sought to develop a program to support a synthesis of Indian culture with the compatible skills and values of the dominant society. Other goals were to interact with public schools to improve the instructional program and educational setting for American Indian students, an important condition for enabling them to complete school and to construct alternatives (professional, life style). Involving parents in the education program supported the progress of their children and the unity of the family.

Background: The Preschool Program

From its beginning eight years ago, TACC education programs were in a developmental process for children, parents, and staff persons. The program began with a single preschool. As community needs were expressed, TACC sought to meet them by providing important additional programs: day care, parenting/infant-toddler, tutorial, kindergarten, and primary school. Development was planned not only in terms of the type of program offered according to age level, but also in terms of the quality of educational program. Workshops, training, and supervision enhanced staff capability and creativity. Evaluation provided direction for goal-setting and for improving performance of both children and staff.

TACC preschool programs offered children a diverse environment for active learning and exploration. Children participated in directing their own growth--making plans and decisions, setting goals, manipulating materials and the environment, and relating as individuals to parents, peers, and teachers. Children began to learn that they had the abilities to plan and complete tasks of their own choice, and to reach their own goals. They became eager to engage in new ventures as they attained success. The classroom was arranged to facilitate child control of the environment--materials were placed in learning areas (blocks, books, tasks/manipulatives, art, music, carpentry, life sciences, dramatic play, cooking, sand and water); labels (pictures of objects) were placed on shelves so that children knew where to find/replace them. Teachers facilitated children planning their own activities, then interacted with them to expand/extend them; open-ended questions enabled children to derive concepts from what they were doing. Through such interactions and observations, teachers evaluated the progress of children.

TACC's cultural/environmental classroom provided a curriculum that related conceptual growth with the child's cultural heritage. Traditional methods of education, such as oral histories handed down by elders, the use of natural materials and cultural artifacts, music and

dance, and experiential learning affirmed the vitality, richness, and depth of native cultures. The rationale for the curriculum was to transmit through active learning respect for and knowledge of traditional native values. An objective of the classroom was for children to represent their unique experiences/heritages. An array of materials --natural, "found," and purchased--supported this process. One five-year-old boy, for example, who had just returned from visiting his grandparents in Arizona created a "diorama" in the art area. He selected cotton balls which he formed together to make sheep; these were placed in a popsicle stick enclosure. Crayon-drawn horses were also enclosed in a similar fence. The family dwelling, a hogan, was cut from brown construction paper. He also cut a small rectangle of white paper on which he drew the beginnings of a simple, traditional design. This was glued to two narrow sticks to represent a weaving loom and rug. All objects were glued "3-D" fashion to a large sheet of paper. Finally, he dictated to one of the teachers a story, telling about the objects. Story and art work were shared with friends.

TACC helped children to become aware of their culture, and to develop skills in communicating their awareness/knowledge to others, and thereby to affirm their individual self-esteem. Parents and community persons were essential resources and participants--for classroom activities, for concept formation, and for value definition.

Objective Testing

Early evaluation efforts at TACC sought to compare the relative merits of three alternative models of instruction for preschool children: (1) cultural/environmental (based on American Indian cultures), (2) Montessori, and (3) traditional/Piaget. Standardized tests such as the Peabody Picture Vocabulary provided evidence that culturally-relevant curricula can contribute to increased learning. In two classrooms, the traditional/Piaget and the Montessori, the Caucasian children scored higher than the Indian children in language competence; in the third classroom, the cultural/environmental, the Indian children scored higher.

Within the past three years (1976-1979), evaluation efforts were more broadly incorporated into the programs. The external evaluators, Larry E. Orcutt and Associates sought to aid teachers and administrators in program planning and in utilizing evaluation information to plan more specifically for child growth. In developing an evaluation design to encompass the broad span of TACC's programs (infant/toddler, preschool, kindergarten, and primary), Orcutt and Associates utilized standardized tests to identify areas of difficulty and of strengths in children.

Preschool

1977-1978--During this two-year period, preschool children were given two subtests from the Circus battery published by Educational Testing Services: (1) How Much and How Many (counting, relational terms, and numerical concepts) and (2) What Words Mean (three kinds of vocabulary items: nouns, verbs, and modifiers). Children were tested in November (pretest) and again in May (posttest). Percentile scores showed that the children did better in mathematics than in language on both tests. Also, gains in math skills from pretest to posttest were much greater than the gains in language skills. Gains for the children were greater in both areas during the second year than in the first. The overall level of language skills was substantially lower than the

level of math skills.

1978-1979--The Verbal Scale of the McCarthy Scales of Children's Abilities was administered to the preschool children in June of 1979. This test was chosen because teachers objected to the level of difficulty (for children) of the Circus battery and because the McCarthy is both easily administered and has carefully developed norms. The McCarthy can also be used up through age 8 1/2 so continuity of measures can be obtained in subsequent school years. The Verbal Scale assesses the child's ability to express himself/herself verbally, and also assesses the maturity of his/her verbal concepts. The mean scaled score on the McCarthy is 50, with standard deviations of 10. Test results showed that 75% of the children tested scored within the mean, 17% scored one standard deviation above the mean, and 8% scored one standard deviation below. Although no one test appeared to be significantly more or less difficult than another, the children overall did best on the Verbal Memory I test which requires short-term memory (repeating words/sentences said by the testor). The Verbal Fluency Test, requiring divergent thinking (child has to provide examples of things to eat, animals, things to wear, and things to ride) appeared to be the most difficult test. The latter test enabled children to provide responses that were culturally related: fry bread, buffalo, sheep, hairties, shawl. Two factors may have contributed to a certain error of measurement in determining true scores. Although the evaluator was able to establish rapport, many of the children appeared quite shy, particularly the child who scored lowest. Many of the children misinterpreted the evaluator (understood "shrink" to be "drink" and "thread" to be "bread").

Kindergarten

For a three-year period, 1976-1979, TACC's kindergarten class was tested using the Tests of Basic Skills (TOBE-K). Children were given the Language (measures knowledge of vocabulary, sentence structure, verb tense, sound-symbol relationships, letter recognition and context), Mathematics (tests knowledge of basic terms, associations, relations, and concepts considered prerequisite to a primary mathematics

curriculum), and General Concepts (tests a composite of items from four subject-area tests: math, language, science, and social studies) tests in both pretests and posttests. The general analytic test used by the evaluators--and one which fits a combination of test and observational findings--was the identification of relative group strengths and weaknesses. Results of children's performances showed:

	Strong	Weak
general concepts	physical properties symbolic representation animal characteristics counting/logic earth sciences	measuring seasons biology
mathematics	terms/position (circle) geometric shapes terms (small, together) counting/logic	terms (half) coin identification measuring (thermometer) relative weight classification terms measuring length
language	position terms (first) symbol declaring	past tense future tense rhyming phonemes

A checklist which encompasses the major types of items on the test can serve as a class profile of strengths and weaknesses, and can then be used as a management guide to identifying small groups with common weaknesses.

The most recent year evidenced the strongest gains for the kindergarten children. Posttest scores indicated approximately 30 percentile point increases in each subject area test over the 1978-1979 school year, demonstrating significant program gains in the areas of language, general concepts, and mathematics. (In language, percentile scores rose from 35th to 60th; in math, from 28th to 57th; and from 35th to 67th in general concepts.) Stanine scores increased from 4 to 6 in language, 4 to 5 in math, and from 4 to 6 in general concepts, all indicating performance levels at the national average and slightly above. Although the TOBE-K does not test expressive language skills per se, it does base its measures on receptive language skill abilities in that all tests are

presented orally by an examiner.

Comparison of scores on the TOBE-K over the three year period showed: (1) Children demonstrate greatest difficulty with math concepts, particularly those dealing with money values and measurement; (2) students score highest in general concepts; (3) students in the program have made the greatest gains in language over the three-year period; and (4) students entered the program with skill levels slightly below the national average consistently (pretest stanine of 4).

Infant/Toddler Program

The Denver Developmental Screening Test was administered to infants and toddlers enrolled with their parents in the Child Development Resource Center at TACC. The DDST, an individually administered screening device, was designed for early identification of children with developmental and/or behavior problems from birth to age six. This device assessed four general areas: personal-social, fine-motor, gross-motor, and language development. For the year 1978-1979, although five of the 23 children initially tested in the fall scored delays, no score was considered an abnormal measure. In the June follow-up, four of the five children were reevaluated. Of the three who each scored one delay, two retested with no delays; the child who scored four delays initially in three areas was reassessed with only one delay.

Review

A review of all data from infant/toddler, preschool, kindergarten, and primary assessments shows continuing problems in language in both reception and expression. While TACC's preschool and kindergarten programs have improved in their positive impacts, the language problems cumulate at least through the second grade. The language problems which children have even before preschool are serious and interfere, first, with their social skills, and later, with their academic skills, due to weaknesses in their ability to communicate orally. By the time they reach primary grades, the language problems have broadened to include reading, writing,

and listening skills which are measured at that time, and which are important for successful functioning in public school. Speech production and auditory discrimination problems contribute heavily to the difficulties children have with reading and language tasks.

Parent interaction checklists from the infant/toddler program showed that many parents have very few verbal interactions with their children, do not read to their children often, and do not ask questions or systematically reinforce verbal responses. These observations help to explain the language difficulties found in later age levels of children. Findings are strong enough to warrant high priority and comprehensive parent involvement and training efforts in the coming years at all levels.

Note: For the data reported in this section for the years 1976-1979 all program participants, adult and child, were American Indians residing in an urban area (Los Angeles).

Problems in Utilizing Standardized Tests With Preschool Children

1. Helping children to feel comfortable in a one-to-one setting with an evaluator.

2. Need to test children on an individual basis (time consuming, costly).

3. Learning to work with a variety of children, some unresponsive, some bright, some hyperactive, and to administer a test to such diverse students over a four or six hour day in a consistent manner so that each child is treated the same as all others.

4. Wide range in abilities in children at each age level; for low and high performance, test was not an adequate diagnostic tool.

5. Children, in general, had significant difficulty in (a) following directions, (b) attending to task, and (c) controlling impulsivity. Their attention spans decreased rapidly as soon as testing began, and they were highly distracted by stimuli in the environment.

6. Where tests are required to be administered to a group of children, how should one interpret the scores of a child who must be tested individually (kindergarten level).

7. Preschool classrooms are primarily based on active, experiential manipulation of materials/objects; standardized tests require verbal responses to verbal questions.

8. Many test items were outside of the experience of the children (cultural, family, climate, urban).

9. Normative measures for performance by American Indian children are not available for any preschool tests; no sampling plan to justify the norms that are provided.

10. The lack of any information on how items were selected to measure the various competencies makes the instrument difficult to interpret.

11. Lack of advice on what to do when a child does not understand instructions or cannot interpret what a question is asking. Explaining the item to the child reduces the standardization of the test and makes interpretation of the score ambiguous. Failing to explain the item

leads to an erroneous interpretation of the child's skills/concepts.

12. Tests may not be sensitive to changes in student competencies over short periods of time.

13. Absenteeism, program terminations, class changes, and new students insured that data were incomplete and difficult to analyze.

Beyond Testing: Observational Data

Discussions with administrators, supervisors, teachers, and evaluators yielded a common frustration with the inadequacy of the standardized tests. TACC's program was experiential with emphasis on problem solving and active learning by children. Interactions, child/child, child/teacher, and child/material on individual and small group bases were critical elements of the learning environment. Growth was evident, in the preschool classrooms, in the increasing complexity of children's planning, and in their execution of tasks wherein they combined diverse materials and constructed elaborate block-wood-material-paper structures. Planning, story-telling, and group and individual communications revealed gains in language ability. Children were independent, motivated, and eager to encounter new situations. No tests measured the totality of this growth; the testing situation seemed not to elicit the language knowledge of the children. Two issues emerged: (1) how to evaluate and document all areas of growth and (2) how to use the information in improving educational opportunities for children. Important considerations, too, were how to report the information to parents and to funding sources and how to use the information in planning program and staff development.

Additional methods of assessment were sought and developed. Teachers, as part of their planning/record keeping for the children and classroom maintained anecdotal records wherein they wrote observations of child behavior. Areas of focus included language, cognitive (problem solving and concept development), physical, social/emotional, and motivation/independence. Dated entries were made throughout the school year to provide a profile of development. In planning classroom activities, teachers utilized the information as a needs assessment for individual children and for small groups of children. TACC supervisors developed a checklist to record developmental levels of children. Observation of a behavior was checked as "never," "sometimes," or "always." Teachers utilized the checklist when a child first entered the program,

at mid-year, and again at the conclusion of the school year. This information, too, directed teacher and program planning. Further, the data gained through observation provided specific details on developmental gains and activities of children that could be reported to parents and funding sources.

An important result of the use of observational data was the development of a research study at the infant/toddler center. The primary purpose of the study was to analyze parent/child interactions to identify areas of strength in learning in Indian children. The study was to seek to determine the effects of intervention and various interaction styles on language and cognitive development and on subsequent academic performance. Observations would occur in the home setting. Observers would focus on such variables as frequency of verbal interactions, mode of verbal response, specificity of suggestions (verbal) or help (non-verbal) given to the child, and amount of physical contact with children. Observers would also make general or overall assessments on the extent to which the parent let the child learn from the situation itself, rather than pushing, interrupting, or becoming impatient/cross; and the extent to which, and the manner in which, the parent helped the child to focus on a particular task. Administrators and evaluators looked upon the study as a potential tool for identifying learning styles/strengths that derive from traditional child-rearing practices and/or cultural values.

Evaluation Roles

Roles of the evaluator, supervisor, teachers, and administrator emerged from the need to integrate observational and objective test data.

Evaluator

An independent, professional evaluator sought involvement throughout the program year. During 1977-1978, he engaged TACC education staff persons in a planning process to set priorities, to establish a master calendar, and to gain commitment from individuals to be responsible for completing specific assignments. The evaluator provided information to teaching staff on the objectives/importance of the testing. He provided training to individuals (including teachers) who would administer the tests to the children. Following pretesting, tests were scored and the data was analyzed. Information was shared with teachers regarding strengths and weaknesses of individual children and of the group as a whole. Test results were considered in light of information gained from teachers and parents. Teaching strategies and specific types of activities were suggested to develop areas of weaknesses and to continue to expand areas of strengths. (This became highly specific in TACC's primary school primarily in the areas of reading and math where detailed analyses were made of the skills assessed by the California Test of Basic Skills, a test widely utilized in public schools throughout California.) Analysis was later made regarding the posttesting. Comparisons were made on individual children and programs from pretest to posttest and on children/programs over time. The evaluator provided mid-year and final reports to the administrators, and developed, in agreement with program staff, evaluation designs for subsequent program years (for inclusion in proposals for funding). He was available to all staff as a resource on evaluation and evaluation literature.

Supervisor

The supervisor functioned as a liaison between the teachers and evaluator. She planned with the evaluator strategies helpful in developing or further assessing weak areas and in further developing areas of strength. Hers was a follow-up role: she obtained information from teachers on their implementation of evaluator strategies; she discussed anecdotal records of children and plans to enhance individual growth; and she helped teachers to develop plans based on observations and checklist results. As part of the supervision process, she observed individual children, teacher interactions, and classroom functioning to improve the educational setting and opportunities for children. She was responsible for implementing TACC's philosophy/methodology within the classroom as it related to instruction and assessment. Further, she coordinated training/information workshops for parents.

Teachers

Teachers (includes all teaching staff: master teachers, teachers, teaching assistants) were partners with the evaluators, sharing their knowledge of individual children in order to construct a profile for each child. Discussion ensued on specific areas of child learning identified by tests and by observation. These were really "brainstorming" sessions --attempts to generate diverse ideas which could then be implemented in the classroom and evaluated for effectiveness. Knowledge gained during informal and "formal" meetings with parents helped teachers to gain additional perspectives on students. Teachers were required to maintain anecdotal records, to complete an assessment checklist on each child, and to plan/implement/review their educational curriculum/activities for children. Compilation of evaluation activities occurred outside classroom time; total classroom time was devoted to the children.

Administrator

At the beginning of each year, TACC's Director of Education and Classroom Supervisor established a plan for direction with each teaching team and program segment. Consideration was given to program objectives, staff and child needs and abilities, parent interests/goals/concerns, and TACC's educational methodology/philosophy. Review was conducted on a monthly basis to assess program progress in relation to the plan, to actual needs/results, and to professional excellence. TACC's education management team maintained contact--through site visits, reports, meetings (group and individual)--with all staff persons to facilitate growth in the areas of program implementation, child development, educational program, staff development, child behavior, and parent involvement. Information from staff, parents, and evaluator was reviewed and summarized for reports submitted to funding agencies. Such information was reviewed in parent and staff meetings during planning for new directions and program improvements.

Summary

1. Select assessment based on correspondence to curriculum.

2. No one standard test will ever, in the urban situation, serve to give teachers, administrators, and funding agencies all the information that is needed to evaluate student progress.

3. A best-fit, carefully selected standardized test is an efficient way to get an overview of group and individual performance on variables that are known to be critical to later public school success.

4. Cultural variables studied or impacted in preschools should include those which directly relate to language development and success in school.

5. Do not force tests on students who are severely lacking in experiences or unable to handle the testing situation.

6. Develop alternative test administration procedures; look up examples or vocabulary lists to tailor the situation to fit the students' experiences/frame of reference.

7. Evaluation efforts should be aimed primarily at an assessment of, and the strengthening of, resources that impact on students' language-related skills--materials, staff capability/training, individual and group activities, parent at-home strategies.

8. Evaluation specialists should supplement the testing process by doing more detailed diagnosis for students with serious problems by testing for speech and hearing problems and for learning disabilities.

9. Teachers should not be trained or forced to become researchers or test analysts; the evaluator should help teachers to move directly from information on individuals or groups to an assessment of the instructional support capability.

10. Use teacher and parent informal observations and first-hand knowledge to supplement test information; observational and testing data should be integrated.

11. Parent at-home strategies and training/information programs should be a direct product of the evaluation and on-going planning process and should be tailored to fit specific individual student needs.

Conclusion

The state of the art in measurement is not adequate to assess efficiently all objectives for children in a preschool program. The preschool level tests may be regarded more as a predictor of how a child will do in public school than as a valid indicator of progress in a school program.

In urban settings, children range widely in skills; many have learning disabilities and experiential deficits. Evaluation persons working in such a setting should have wide-ranging diagnostic testing and instruction experience with students with special needs. While achievement tests can be administered by classroom teachers (reducing costs), trained diagnosticians should be available to test for more serious problems (perceptual, motor, language, speech, auditory).

Standardized testing was selected by TACC as a device to gain longitudinal data on urban American Indian children--to be accumulated from entry as an infant/toddler in a parenting program through completion of TACC's primary school (third grade). (Follow-up could also occur after the children entered public school.) We anticipated revealing learning patterns that would have their beginnings in the early development of children. Standardized tests represented a level of objectivity and reliability which could be interpreted relatively easily to yield data on child learning. We focused on language and mathematics as these represented areas critical to successful performance in present public school programs.

Such testing in TACC's programs produced information on areas of strengths and weaknesses in specific skill areas. It identified, for example, a range of language difficulties across the preschool/primary years. While the tests did provide some useful information, they were not wholly appropriate. They did not provide an adequate evaluation of the preschool program or its overall effect on children. More specific information on child performance on a broader range of functioning--motivation/independence, cognitive (problem-solving,

concept learning), social-emotional, physical, and language--was gained through observation of child behaviors. The latter information was recorded by teachers and used on a daily basis to direct curriculum and child activities.

Objective testing, where used, needs to attend to the use of results. Evaluation time and money need to support directly the teacher, improving the teacher's knowledge of students and what to do for them, and, thereby, raise the quality of instruction. To be useful, such testing needs to occur early in the year such that analysis of individual and group skills can be made. The evaluation itself, however, should begin with the cumulative set of information on students--including that which is known to parents and teachers. It should extend outward from this base to become a continuing and comprehensive assessment of what needs to be done to strengthen children's skills.

Objective testing, then, was only part of the evaluation design at TACC. To integrate all sources of information on children--test and observational data--at the program level, evaluation personnel conducted or facilitated debriefings/brainstorming sessions with teachers and supervisors. The outcome of such sessions included design of individual learning materials/activities, design of small and large group activities, improvement in the learning environment, identification of gaps in materials, identification of staff training needs, and design of parent support activities. Sessions with supervisors and administrators aided program planning and development.

The Authors

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